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EAST CENTRAL AFRICA

PART IV

THE NILOTES OF THE ANGLO-EGYPTIAN SUDAN AND UGANDA

by

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THE LUO OF KENYA

GENERAL[4]

[101] 133 The Luo; or Nilotic Kavirondo, inhabit the territories bordering Victoria Nyanza, north and south of the Kavirondo Gulf. Kavirondo is in the south, a flat plain relieved by a few rocky tors and ridges upon which the people build their homesteads; in the north the country is hilly. The rolling, grassy savannahs, the swamps, numerous water-courses and patches of thorn-wood forest make it comparable to the environments of the other more northern Nilotic tribal groups.

105 The country is suitable for pastoral and agricultural activities, and the lake is rich in fish. The people are mainly agricultural and grain foods form the chief part of their diet. Cattle, sheep and goats are kept. Cattle are the chief criterion of wealth. Women and girls are strictly forbidden to have anything to do with them and there is every indication that cattle enter into the social life of the people to the same degree as among the Nuer and Dinka. Fishing plays a large part in

(1) Driberg, The Lango. 1923. pp.140-52.
(2) Ibid., p.152. (3) Ibid., pp.160-7.
(4) Except for three articles by Evans-Pritchard, there is practically no information on the Luo of Kenya.

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economic activities and although, formerly, there were organised hunts, today hunting is not much practised.

LUO EXPANSION

Until the time of European intervention the Luo appear to have been gradually expanding towards the south. This resulted in their division into two parts (on the north and south of the Kavirondo Gulf) namely: the Luo of Central Kavirondo and the Luo of Southern Kavirondo. Evans-Pritchard writes, "The southwards migration seems to have been across the Gulf from Uyoma and Asembo to Karaeuenya, and not round it, and to have taken place over several generations, commencing, if genealogies are to be trusted, about seven generations ago. Across the Gulf the Luo came up against the Bantu (Aba) and Nilo-Hamitic (Lango) tribes."(1) The assimilation and absorption of these tribes was incomplete at the time of European occupation of the country. During this process of expansion there was a considerable dispersal of lineages so that lineages of the same clan are found in both Central and South Kavirondo. The Luo tribes least influenced by the Bantu are the Uyoma, Sawe and Asembo and such tribes as pushed the southernmost Luo into Bantu country.

SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE

At the present time Luoland is divided into a number of administrative locations which vary considerably in area and population. These locations, according to Evans-Pritchard, correspond approximately to the old tribal areas of the Luo. The expansion of the Luo has divided them into two main groups with Kisumu location forming a narrow territorial link between them:

1. The Luo of Central Kavirondo, known as *Joipe* (the inside people).
2. The Luo of Southern Kavirondo, known as *Joode* (the outside people).(2)

THE TRIBE *(Piny)*

Among the Luo the tribe is an autonomous political unit. Like the Nuer tribe it may be defined in terms of the way in which homicide was formerly regarded and treated.

Compensation for homicide *(rut)* takes the form of handing over cattle, or a girl, to the kinsmen of a slain man so that heirs may be raised for him. Compensation is only paid for the killing of a tribesman, for men of other tribes, slain in war, raids or private conflict, are regarded as foreign enemies. On the other hand, compensation is not paid for killing a clansman, for such a deed is regarded as a sin, and propitiation and atonement have to be made by the sacrifice of an ox provided by the inno-

(1) Evans-Pritchard, *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, 1940, No.VII, p.2.
(2) *Ibid.*

619 dicte kin of the slayer, and eaten by representatives of the entire clan.
It might, however, be insisted on that the slayer should marry a wife in
682 the name of the dead clansman and raise heirs to him. Strangers having
close kinship links with a dominant clan, may refuse to pay compensation,
and they tend to regard killing as a sin, since the acceptance of compensa-
tion for homicide emphasized a distinction they are anxious to obliter-
ate.(1) A Lao tribe can be defined as a unit in which compensation for
homicide is paid, or in which there is provision for payment and the
settlement of the feud.

The Tero Hara

619 Lao tribes were formerly separated from each other by the thio - a
766 stretch of bush country left unoccupied. Between segments of the same
tribe there was no thio. The ritual demonstration of *tero hara* took
place across these boundaries. It was the custom of the Lao in the past
not to bury an important man, known for his wealth or for his military
ability, until the whole tribe, or a large part of it, had crossed the
thio and demonstrated in front of the homesteads of the neighbouring tribe.
The demonstration took the form of insults, challenges to fight and the
tempting parade of cattle. It was a matter of honour for the challenging
party to stand their ground and defend their herds with their lives. Such
demonstrations were also made against neighbouring Hmôn who had a similar
structure to that of the Lao tribes. The demonstrating party was not
usually attacked unless two hara parties of opposing tribes met. Some-
times, however, the opportunity was taken to try and raid the cattle of
the neighbouring tribe.

619 Payment of compensation and the tero hara are the two main indica-
tions of tribal separation. In addition there is the association of a
specific lineage unit with a tribe.

CLANS AND LINEAGES

603 Each Lao tribe has a dominant clan or lineage. The clan (*thu-ot*),
has a lineage structure and lineages are differentiated by adding to the
604 name of the clan or larger lineage on end the individual name of the
smaller branch. Formerly, the clans were exogamous but today the larger
clans are not always so. Within the large clans minimal lineages can
intermarry when the distance between them has become great enough.

336 Where the separation between two lineages has not proceeded far
enough or where two clans are closely related there is a socially recog-
nized form of love-making called *cuak*, which takes place between the young
men and girls of both groups. Marriage is not permitted until the
582 separation has proceeded further. After some generations the less ap-
583 proved type of marriage (*pur*) may be permitted. This is marriage by ab-
duction and is eventually replaced by the ordinary form (*sabo*) when
the complete separation and distinctiveness of the units is recognized.(2)

583 A man is forbidden to marry a woman who is a *sat*, a cognatic relation.

(1) Cooper-Chrisfield, *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, 1949, No.VIII, p.6.
(2) *Ibid.*, p.7.

Among the Luo a man is excluded from marrying into clans as distant as that of his maternal grandmother or into the maximal lineage of his maternal great-grandmother. Thus a Luo man may not marry his kin, but only *wasiga* (mamsies) with whom no kinship is recognised. It is, therefore, difficult for a man to marry into a clan or lineage within his own tribe. The system of exogamy assists in the structural differentiation of a tribe but also it creates relations of a personal and kinship nature between individuals of two different tribes. 582

The relationship between kinship and territorial units seems to follow closely the pattern found in other Nilotic tribal groups. In the Alego tribe, for example, we are told that there is a dominant clan, the Jo Alego, and its maximal lineages, the Jo Sege and the Ka Dengo. There are a number of other clans and large lineages living in the tribal territory as well as small stranger lineages and individuals. The presence of these clans and lineages in Alego, and their relations with the Jo Alego, are accounted for by traditions or myths in which stranger lineages and the lineages in possession (which are personified) intermarry, and the stranger lineages assume the position of in-laws. Other tribal areas have a similar structure. Evans-Pritchard states that the relative values of lineages are the same as with the Nuer. In opposition to other maximal lineages a man will give the name of his own maximal lineage but when speaking of an opposed smaller lineage he will give his own immediate lineage, the particular branch of the maximal lineage to which it belongs.(1) 613 614

The Dominant Clan

The dominant clan is usually identified linguistically with the tribe. Thus, Alego means both the tribesmen of Alego tribal territory and the patrilineal descendants of Alego. Members of the dominant clan alone are *jopiny* or *jopiny* - the people of the land and the owners of it. The rest are *jodak* - the separated people, the strangers. Stranger lineages are grafted into the lineage structure of the dominant clan so that, through recognition of female links, the whole tribe may be regarded as a system of exogamic lineages. The Luo refer to the affiliated stranger lineages as *kwero* - lineages of in-laws, or *tawo* - lineages of maternal uncles, since it is from them that they take their wives and the mothers of their children.(2) 619 614 613

For general purposes the *jopiny* and *jodak* are on equal terms and co-operate in matters of common interest. The differentiation only appears in matters of ritual, in marriage regulations and when homicide occurs. In recent times the differentiation has become plainer through land disputes. Formerly there was enough land for everyone and more could be obtained by war and migration. Now, there is considerable inter-lineage enmity about land. The *jopiny* claim the land in virtue of their ownership of the tribal territory and as proof of this they point to the ancestral graves. Stranger lineages which are numerous and powerful may also claim to be *jopiny* in the same area and, having dwelt there for some generations, can also point to their ancestral graves. It is the general rule that a lineage has the right to cultivate land where its forebears have lived for several genera- 614 613 578

(1) Evans-Pritchard, *Sudan Linguistics Journal*, 1949, No.VII, pp.10-11.
(2) *Ibid.*, p.12.

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tions. Sometimes several lineages can claim this right, and the structural differentiation and the type of connecting link between them is revealed in the resulting disputes.

IMPORTANT MEN AMONG THE LUO

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There is no real political office in the Luo tribes, but there are a number of people who are of notable status.

The Ruoth

The *ruoth* is simply an influential man. He is richer in wives and cattle than most people, and he may help a poor man to marry by giving him a cow. Any man may become a *ruoth*, although he is usually a member of the dominant clan of the tribe. No such political or ritual significance are attached to the Luo *ruoth* as are associated with the Lango and Acholi *rwodi*.(1)

Thuondi

The *thuondi* are warriors of reputation. They lead all the raids against the tribal enemies. Their position depends entirely on individual ability in war, and therefore they are not necessarily succeeded by their sons.

The Nun Gweng

The *nun gweng* is the father of the land and a man of influence in every district. He is a senior member of a lineage of the dominant clan of the tribe, and settles land disputes within the tribe. He also sacrifices to the sacred spear of the clan, and points it towards the enemy before a tribal war begins.(2)

RITUAL EXPERTS

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The *jabilo* is the most important of the ritual experts and the chief tribal figure. There may be more than one *jabilo* in each tribal segment, but usually one is more influential than the rest. The *jabilo* inherits his position from his father. His functions include divination of the fortunes of war, cursing the enemy and making magic to secure victory. Although he does not accompany the warriors, the *jabilo* receives part of the spoil in return for his services and is, therefore, usually a *ruoth* - a rich man. A further investigation of the *jabilo*'s place in society would be particularly interesting. It is said that he was also a peace-maker and could intervene in a fight by dragging his leopard-skin along the ground between the two opposing sides.(3) The *jabilo* sometimes exercises the functions of rain-maker (*jabuth or nun kuth*).

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Luo tribal structure appears to be, in all essentials, similar to that of the Nuer; the typical segmentary lineage structure, associated

(1) Evans-Pritchard, *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, 1948, No. VII, p.5.
(2) *Ibid*., pp.5-6.
(3) *Ibid*., p.6.
cf. Nuer leopard-skin chief.

with territorial unit, is not organised round a symbolic office such as the Shilluk *reth*ship, the Anuak nobility or the Acholi chiefship. The interaction of the segmentary system is the basis of organisation and co-operation. The Lango organisation closely approaches that of the Luo but, until further information is forthcoming as to the exact position of the Lango *rwot* and the political importance of the lineage system, the degree of similarity is difficult to determine. On the basis of present knowledge it would seem that the Lango, with their hierarchy of village headmen, *jago* and *rwoth* are more highly organised than the acephalous Luo, with their ritual experts, elders and lineage heads.

THE LUO HOMESTEAD

The homestead, the residence of an elementary, or sometimes a joint, family, is generally called a *dala* (Bantu) or *pamo* (Nilotic). It is surrounded with a thick hedge of euphorbia, in which is a narrow gap forming the entrance to the kraal round which are grouped the huts and granaries.

According to Evans-Pritchard, there is no real village group. The head of the homestead is the head of the family occupying it. Each married man has his own hut, with huts for his wives on either side. Unmarried women live in a hut looked after by an old woman, and single men occupy a bachelors' hut near the gate in order to guard against cattle thieves. Sons often go and found their own homesteads if they wish to be independent. The eldest son eventually builds his wife a hut of her own outside his father's homestead and the younger brothers will later do the same. The large polygynous family thus splits up gradually as the sons extend their own family units and form separate homesteads. This process is completed with the death of the original man *dala* and the inheritance of the widows. The first wife is the chief wife of the homestead, but a husband sets aside so many cattle for each of his wives for use by their families and these are inherited by the sons on the father's death.

INHERITANCE

Property is inherited by a man's sons or, failing sons, by his brother. A widow, on the death of her husband is inherited by one of his brothers, by a distant kinsman, or, if she is still young, by a son born of a different wife. The widow is *ci lieal*, 'the wife of the grave',(1) and children born to her are called after the dead husband who is regarded as their *pater*.

MARRIAGE

Bridewealth

The number of bridewealth animals varies according to circumstances. Before the cattle plagues at the end of the 19th century 20 to 40 cattle were given, in 1922 the usual number was 15 to 20, and since that time the number has been further reduced. According to Evans-Pritchard the bridewealth cattle fall into two parts:(2)

1. The *dho kony*: the animals first handed over by the husband and due to

(1) Evans-Pritchard, *Africa* VII, 1934, p. 161. (2) *Ibid.*, p. 170.

583 certain relatives. According to Shaw these represent the conventional payment which is made without question or discussion.(1) They are the basic minimum required if the marriage is to be concluded. One or two at a time are transferred over a period of about two years.

2. *The ebe i kenyi* additional cattle, the number of which is determined after lengthy negotiations between the husband's people and the wife's people. They average about 5 to 7. A number of goats are also handed over. If the two families are very friendly the transfer of the last animal may be postponed until the marriage of a daughter of the union.(2)

The father of the bride gets the bulk of the animals, most of which will be used as bridewealth for the marriages of his sons. The bride's maternal uncle gets a heifer and, according to Shaw, her paternal uncle gets a bull and heifer.(3) Usually the bride's family make some return gifts to the bridegroom's people, amounting to at least three head of cattle.

686 If there is a divorce the husband can demand the return of the cattle with their progeny. Usually every effort is made to avoid repaying bridewealth and the wife is often replaced by a sister or cousin. If two children have been born no bridewealth cattle would be returned if the wife died or left her husband; if there were only one child the bridewealth would be returned but two or three beasts would be retained.

Marriage Ceremonies

583 According to Evans-Pritchard, there are two forms of marriage: *pur* and *ambo*.(4) *Pur* is marriage by elopement, and is regarded as shameful. Usually the girl's parents accept the situation and the union is regularised by the acceptance of some cattle - but fewer than is normal. *Ambo* is the correct and usual form of marriage; a long chain of events intervenes between the time of obtaining the parents' permission to marry, and the marriage itself. It takes several months to complete a marriage, sometimes several years, according to the individual family circumstances.(5)

585 When the parents on both sides agree to the proposal of marriage, *there follows the ceremonial capture of the bride - the ambo ayaka.* A mock fight occurs between the bride's people and the bridegroom's party, and the bride resists to show that she is not eloping. She goes to the bridegroom's village and is deflowered in the presence of witnesses. She is given a girdle with a tail *(ruom)* which she wears as a sign of her new status.

The dwora and lapu ceremonies take place within a few weeks and are followed by the *dambo* party, which consists of a visit to the bride's parents and the paying of respects to her mother. There is feasting, singing and drinking through the night, and a few days later the bride returns to her parents' home. The bride now spends part of her time with

(1) Shaw, *Kitabu*, 1930, Doc 69-4, p. 45.
(2) Evans-Pritchard, *Africa*, VI, 1933, p. 390.
(3) Shaw, *op.cit.*
(4) Evans-Pritchard, *op.cit.*, p. 390.
(5) Shaw *op.cit.*

the bridegroom and part with her parents. The bridewealth payments now begin and the wife's parents try to hurry up the payments by luring her home on frequent visits. The bridegroom cannot prevent her departure or demand her return. To get her to return he hands over another animal and she then stays with him for a short while. This procedure is repeated until the bride is definitely recognized as his wife and stays with him except for brief visits to her old home. 585

The *rim* ceremony is the binding act of marriage. After it the husband is entitled to redress if the wife has intercourse with other men. As the husband is anxious to start a home and cannot do so while his wife keeps running back to her parents, he presses for the *rim* ceremony to be held as soon as he has paid 6 to 12 head of cattle. It is rare for a marriage to be broken off after this stage has been reached. The *rim* ceremony is held in the husband's homestead and is a day of celebration. The wife is given a series of presents by her husband's people, each gift being named as it is presented to her. She herself keeps some of them and they are taken by the girls of the *rim* party from her parents' village. [431]

The final ceremony takes place a few months later when the husband calls his wife to cook for him instead of cooking in his mother's hut. Usually after the birth of the first child he begins to built an *ot* - a proper dwelling; up to this time the couple have lived in the bachelors' hut *(simbi)*. Necessary household articles are collected by the wife from her parents' home and so, after a great number of ceremonies and rituals, the union is accomplished and the basis of a family is laid.

RESPECT (LUO)

The Luo practice extensive avoidance as a part of the general attitude of respect to a wife's family. A man turns his back to his parents-in-law when speaking to them and avoids them if he meets them on a path. He never visits his mother-in-law naked.[1] This attitude of respect is extended to all the members of his wife's lineage, particularly the older people, and including the lineage of her maternal uncle. The husband's brothers, on the other hand, respect only his parents-in-law and considers him of their generation. 576 606

The avoidance rules are relaxed as the marriage gradually grows more stable and children are born. A ceremony is held at the birth of the first child to enable the husband to enter his mother-in-law's hut and eat there. The husband and his brothers are relaxed to eat after a goat has been presented to them.[2] 606 [98]

RITUAL AND OTHER CULTURAL FEATURES

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The Luo believe in a supreme being whom they call Nyasi. He is 776

[1] Evans-Pritchard, *Africa*, VII, p. 161. [2] *Ibid.*

776 believed to be the creator and originator of all things but he is not worshipped. Birth and death are ascribed to his action. According to Bowen, Nyai is found in large trees, and in time of trouble or sickness offerings are made to him of an animal killed under a large tree; the meat is eaten at a little distance away.[1]

[773] Johnston states that the Lao believe in a supreme god, Chieng, which is the name for the sun.[2] Sirn, however, relegates the sun to an inferior position and writes that when a man comes out of his house in the morning he spits to the east and then to the north, south and west and implores the sun to give him good luck.[3] Northcote states that Lao worship the sun and, to a lesser degree, the moon. A similar spitting ritual is practised when the new moon appears.[4]

It is impossible at present to give a comprehensive account of Lao beliefs from the scanty information available.

ANCESTRAL SPIRITS

775 There is very little information on the ancestral cult. Evans-Pritchard describes a troublesome ghost (*jaciem*, pl. *jaciendi*) and the Lao methods of dealing with it. *Jaciem* is the Lao equivalent of the Shilluk *ciem*, the Ashanti *kra*, Lango *okyen* and the Azande *ariori*. A spirit which has been forgotten by the living; the ghost of a man who died resentful or angry - or of a murdered man whose kin have not exacted revenge - any of these may become a *jaciem*, and cause harm to those who wronged it. The Lao regard ghosts as one of the principal causes of sickness and other misfortunes, and, since it is held that almost any wrong done to a kinsman may be punished by him after death, this belief is a powerful sanction of conduct within the family and kinship group.[5]

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785 The diviner (*nyangs*) discovers the cause of sickness and, if it is
775 due to a particular spirit, sacrifices are offered at his grave with appropriate ritual. If the ghost is not appeased by this attention, another magician is called in, the magela. To protect the sick man's homestead the magela buries in or near it a pot containing medicines. In the last resort, the *jaciem* is called in[illegible] to sacrifices and the ghost warned that if he does not cease his molestations his bones will be dug up, burned and the ashes thrown into the lake or marsh.

775 Normally, a ghost only haunts a kinsman, but a man who has been mur-
783 dered may haunt his murderer. Purificatory rites are performed for someone who has killed a man in battle; these are conducted by a man called *yaguc* who has himself slain a man in battle.

775 It is believed that some ghosts become nature spirits dwelling in water and air, while others occupy the guards used by diviners and answer the questions put to them.

(1) Bowen, *The Northern Shans*, 1910, p.[illegible]
(2) Johnston, *The Upper Mekong*, [illegible], Vol.II, p.[illegible].
(3) Sirn, *Siamese*, 1910, p.[illegible].
(4) Northcote, *[illegible]*, [illegible], p.[illegible].
(5) Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer*, 1940 [illegible], No.[illegible], p.[illegible].

RAIN-MAKING

Little information is available on the processes of rain-making among the Luo. Ruscoe states that it is an important ceremony and is performed by a *mundu* priests who lives among the people for this purpose.(1) According to Northcote, the rain-maker is greatly esteemed, and his homestead is usually found near a big tree which is considered sacred. When rain is wanted, he gathers some herbs, puts them in a large pot of water and boils them under the tree. He draws off a little into another pot and, sucking it up through a reed, squirts it into the air, after first blowing through the reed and making the pot bubble.(2) Evans-Pritchard mentions that the Luo rain-maker is called the *mon loth* and that sometimes his functions are combined with those of the *jabilo*. Rain-makers among the neighbouring Bantu seem to have a higher reputation than Luo *jobilo* and are often consulted.

WITCHCRAFT

Sickness is thought to be due either to the malevolence of a ghost or, more frequently, to magic worked by some envious person who wishes to bring misfortune on his victim.(3) In either case the aid of a witch-doctor is sought and he, by means of various incantations, discovers the cause and the culprit. A sorcerer may cause death by spearing the shadow of his victim, by working spells, by hiding certain objects near the house which bring sickness to the inmates. If a ghost is causing trouble the witch-doctor prescribes offerings and sacrifices necessary for appeasement. He also discovers thieves, conducts ordeals and divines the causes of events. He makes counter-magic to defend people against the activities of sorcerers and is the general prescriber of all cures. Johnston mentions a "deeper magic" (*juogi*) which, among the Ganda tribe is practised by the black-smiths.(4)

LIFE CYCLE

BIRTH

After the birth of a boy the mother stays inside the house for four days; for a girl, she stays inside for three days. The father of the child does not eat or sleep in the hut until the child begins to cut its teeth.

Twins are considered lucky; their arrival is attended by many ceremonies and by propitiatory dances.

PUBERTY

Until marriage, girls help their mothers in the fields and assist them in cooking and carrying. Boys help in herding the animals. At puberty both boys and girls have their front lower teeth extracted and for four days they remain in their homes. After this period they go about visiting

(1) Ruscoe, *The Northern Bantu*, 1915, p.200.
(2) Northcote, *J.A.I.*, 1907, p.58. (3) *Ibid.*
(4) *The Uganda Protectorate*, Vol.II, 1902.

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304 friends and receiving presents of food. Girls, in addition, have their bodies scarified on the sides and back. From this time on until marriage the boys live in the bachelors' hut and the girls in the unmarried women's quarters. There is no mention by any of the authorities of an age-set system.

DEATH

764 The dead are buried close to their homes, a man on his right side with the hand under the head and a woman on her left side, also with the hand under the head.(1)

765 Friends and relatives gather shortly after death and, if the deceased was a man of importance, the whole of his clan is represented. Every man brings his companion bull and rides it. All dress up as if for war and the burn party takes place. If the dead man was not very important the mourning is limited to shaving the head and painting the body with white clay. Offerings are put on the grave of the deceased.

/Information on Luo "clan" will be found in category 614./